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SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM ALYTUS: THE BLOOM IS OFF THE LABOR PARTY'S ROSE

¶1. SUMMARY. Less than a week before Lithuania's parliamentary election, few in Alytus doubt that the Labor Party will taste electoral success. However, a growing number question the Labor Party's populist promises and will support Lithuania's more tested traditional parties. End Summary.

Alytus-Lithuania's Youngest City

¶2. Alytus, which has more than 72,000 inhabitants, is Lithuania's sixth largest city and capital of the Dzukija region in Southern Lithuania. Alytus is demographically Lithuania's youngest city, with more than 88 percent of the population working age or younger. Harnessing the vibrancy of its youthful population, Alytus has developed rapidly since independence. Alytus is home more than 2,000 registered businesses, including some of Lithuania's largest, such as Alyta (spirits), Astra (machinery and spare parts), and Snaige (refrigerators). Some 69 businesses, including a major Coca-Cola production facility, have foreign direct investment.

Labor Party Strong, But Losing Steam

¶3. The Labor Party enjoyed electoral success in June's European parliament elections, garnering 36 percent of the Alytus vote. Few interlocutors believe that Labor will replicate its accomplishments October 10 in Lithuania's parliamentary elections. The Mayor of Alytus City, Vytautas Kirkliauskas, a member of the Arturas Paulauskas-led New Union Party, told us that although the Labor Party was very popular in June, its popularity has steadily decreased. He went on to say that voters are increasingly looking past the populist promises of Victor Uspaskich's party and scrutinizing the bona fides of the party's leaders and candidates. What they have found is a party devoid of leaders, who seek change for the sake of change and are willing to promise nearly anything to secure electoral success. Voicing New Union wishful thinking more than well-grounded political prediction, Kirkliauskas said that Alytus voters seek continuity in the Seimas, and will vote to keep in place a parliament that has achieved so much over the last three years.

¶4. Lina Ivoniniene, President of the Alytus NGO Information Center told us that the Labor Party has charismatic leaders, but it has not developed a strong base in Alytus. Antanas Andriulionis, Chairman of the regional chapter of the Industrialists Confederation and recently retired General Director of Snaige, believes that the Labor Party may secure 30 percent of the vote locally, but that the Brazauskas-Paulauskas Coalition will run a strong second propelled by the Mayor's powerful persuasion.

Active Campaigning-Weak Turnout

¶5. Campaign literature for major political parties and independent candidates abounds in Alytus. Political parties have tapped into the large youth base and helped create student political groups at the 1,300-strong Alytus College. The leader of a non-partisan student NGO said that political parties provided financial support to local youth events in exchange for "unsolicited" support during the event. The Brazauskas-Paulauskas Coalition, for example, provided 7,000 Litai (approximately \$2,500 USD) to the organizers of an outdoor concert.

¶6. Despite the vigorous campaigning, Alytus voters may sleep in on October 10 rather than head to the polls. Several interlocutors expect a voter turnout of 55 percent.

Comment

¶7. Alytus has successfully discarded its Soviet economic and political legacy and transformed itself. Rapid growth and plenty of investment, foreign and domestic, characterize the new city. With all that Alytus has

achieved, a sizable portion of the population will likely find the Labor Party's populist platform appealing. Labor should win the plurality in the first round of voting. With the Barzauskas-Paulauskas Coalition in positions of leadership in Alytus, opposition to Labor may coalesce after round one, and the Labor Party may fare less well in second round run-offs for single mandate seats.

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